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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of a school improvement program for elementary schools (School Effectiveness Training) and for secondary schools (Secondary School Development Program) provided an opportunity to determine if user participation could increase knowledge use. It was hypothesized that program staff participation might be a solution to the dilemma of knowledge use. Interactive techniques were employed to involve program staff. These included joint site visits, debriefing sessions, informal interaction, feedback meetings, field notes, written statements, and formal reports. The use of evaluation information was accelerated as a result of program staff participation. The risks which may accompany staff participation had only slight negative impacts in this study. (DWH)

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INVOLVING PROGRAM STAFF IN EVALUATION STUDIES: A STRATEGY FOR INCREASING INFORMATION USE AND ENRICHING THE DATA BASE

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The way program evaluation findings are used has been a recurrent theme in evaluation literature for nearly two decades. Once, evaluators expected their studies to provide a significant portion of the knowledge base that policy makers consider when making important decisions about a program. Yet as the evaluation field has matured, members have become more sophisticated about how much evaluation, in fact, is used in decision making. They have come to see that many factors other than formal inquiry (for example, practical and political considerations or common sense knowledge) often strongly influence programs' directions (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Weiss, 1980). Evaluators also have come to recognize that "use" can be a relative concept and that different levels of information use occur, from altering perceptions of a program to influencing major decisions about it (Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979). Lastly, they have realized that it is possible to enhance knowledge use a number of ways and that one effective way to do this is by deliberately involving potential information users such as clients, sponsors, and other audiences in their evaluation studies (for example, Gold, 1983; Stake, 1975).

In what follows, we will take a closer look at how one evaluation study tried to meet the knowledge use issue head on by involving program staff in it. First, we will outline some hypotheses about participation as a potential solution to the dilemma of knowledge use. Then we will describe an evaluation strategy that incorporates user participation. Finally, we will draw some conclusions about the effectiveness of this

strategy for increasing the use of this study's information as well as about the implications of employing this kind of evaluation strategy in other instances.

Using Knowledge

As Ernest House (1973) noted, "Producing data is one thing: getting it used is quite another" (p. 133). This sentiment describes a major, chronic dilemma of evaluators. As far back as the middle sixties both Guba (1968) and Stufflebeam (1967) noted that evaluation information is often seen as useless and irrelevant to decision makers. Since then knowledge use--or non use--has been documented quite diligently by evaluators and policy researchers, particularly more recently (for example, see Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1983; Florio, Behrman, & Goltz, 1979; Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). This attention has improved our understanding of the problem of information non use, its causes, and how it might be overcome. One way to increase knowledge use suggested by a number of authors is by involving clients or others in evaluation activities.

Knowledge Use and Client Involvement

In examining the impact of health evaluation research, Patton and his colleagues (Patton, Grimes, Guthrie, Brennan, French, & Blyth, 1975) discovered that evaluation information probably <u>does</u> get used by decision makers. However, they suggested that it is only one of a number of pieces of information that influence decisions and it often competes with other considerations, which Patton and his colleagues label "political"

and "personal." These authors see the personal considerations as the most interesting for they seem to be more susceptible to evaluator influence. Also, they might be influenced by increasing client or sponsor participation. These personal considerations are:

- o general lack of enthusiasm by the client for using information generated by evaluation studies,
- o low regard by clients of the evaluator or evaluation design, and
- o low commitment by the client to using evaluation information in general.

While reviewing the research of Patton and his colleagues as well as many others, Leviton and Hughes (1981) zeroed in on these personal considerations and described clusters of variables associated with personal considerations that they felt would enhance a client's use of information:

- o relevance of the information for program concerns, which includes how well it addresses the needs and concerns of managers and developers, as well as the timeliness of the information;
- o effectiveness of communication, which in the main refers to direct communication of information to users without intervening layers of bureaucracy;
- o ease with which the clients process the information, which includes how well they recognize its relevance, how quickly findings are turned into implications, how the information is presented, and the information processing skills and styles of the key actors;
- o credibility of the information, which includes how it fits with other information or preconceptions that potential users have, the quality of the evaluation, and user opinion of the evaluator; and
- o involvement and advocacy for using the information on the part of a key actor: client, manager, or developer.

They concluded that client involvement in research studies was an effective way to give these variables a positive valence and thereby

enhance the use of evaluation information. They argued that by involving clients in study activities, evaluators stood a better chance of relating research information to user needs and concerns, making sure the information is communicated smoothly and efficiently, helping users recognize its usefulness, keeping their own and the evaluation's credibility high, and gaining the advocacy and involvement of a key actor.

Client involvement in evaluation and policy research studies is not a unique idea. Two evaluation approaches described by Stake (1973) and Gold (1983) explicitly call for user involvement at several stages of the evaluation process. Stake's approach, which he labels "responsive" evaluation, calls for the evaluator to consult users and try to incorporate their interests and values while the study is being designed. He also recommends that their reactions to report drafts be solicited and, whenever possible, they be consulted in the interim. Gold goes even farther in his "stakeholder" approach. According to him the evaluator should adhere to user (stakeholder) preferences--in effect, work for the stakeholders, who specify what kinds of information they want and in what form. Client participation also has been advocated by Ballard and James (1983) and Leitko and Peterson (1982). The former suggest several participation strategies including using advisory committees, circulating report drafts, interacting verbally and in writing, and disseminating research products. Leitko and Peterson go beyond Ballard and James by advocating that participants be involved in research decision making.

Given the findings and recommendations of these authors, it seems that involving potential users in evaluation activities might be an effective way to overcome some barriers to knowledge use. First, it

might help clients to understand research activities more fully than if they were not involved. Second, it might make them more aware of the relevance, credibility, and value of the evaluation information --particularly if they helped generate it. Third, it might make it easier for them to communicate with evaluators. Fourth, it might cause them to become advocates of the evaluation process. Fifth, and most important, it might enable the clients to process the information more quickly and easily and use it more effectively in decision making.

User Participation in an Evaluation Study

During the past two and one-half years, we have had an opportunity to see if user participation could increase knowledge use. We are evaluating two programs that staff members of Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS [also our employer]) are conducting in schools. Staff members who are responsible for those programs have been extensively involved in the evaluation study.

The SET and SSDP Programs

In 1980 staff of the Urban Development (UD) Component at RBS began work on a school improvement program for elementary schools, School Effectiveness Training (SET); in 1983 a program for high schools, the Secondary School Development Program (SSDP), was added. The two programs are similar in that both are approaches to improving urban schools. Moreover, both are sponsored and carried out as a joint effort of the state and local education associations, RBS, the local school district, and the school building staff. The rationale underlying both is that many of the problems of schools are problems of organization, motivation,

communication, coordination, and resource allocation. That is, they are work place problems similar to those in other work settings and therefore, can be solved by organizational development strategies.

Both programs stress the involvement of the total school community in the definition of problem areas and in the improvement of the school's effectiveness. And both are based on the premise that schools can become more effective by making use of existing resources, by opening up the decision-making process, and by making use of the influence of people who carry out the decisions in the daily work of the school.

The only major differences between SET and SSDP arise out of the differences inherent between elementary schools and high schools: size, complexity, diversity, department structures, special programs, and the like.

Evaluation of SSDP and SET

Both programs include an evaluation component which was added in response to stipulations of the funding agent, (the National Institute of Education, [NIE]), to RBS' corporate policies, and to the recognition by the UD developers that knowledge about program implementation and effectiveness is vital for program improvement. Basically, the evaluation consists of a documentation study of the use of SET and SSDP in schools.

The study design emphasizes utility and efficiency. The evaluators and developers both strongly believe that the most important function the study serves is to provide information that program staff can use to help

improve the programs in each site and refine them as they are introduced in new schools. Because the study's resources were quite limited, the methodology also had to be tailored with economy in mind.

The documentation study focuses on these six areas of information earmarked by both developers and evaluators as especially relevant to the success of the two programs:

- o program initiation at each site,
- o program structure and operation at each site,
- o support for the program among school staffs,
- o amount and type of staff participation in the program,
- o characteristics of program processes and structures at each site, and
- o changes introduced in schools because of the program.

The methodology chosen is largely qualitative and informal; it is designed to collect information as completely and economically as possible, while providing timely feedback to program staff and maintaining the quality of information through the use of multiple data-collection methods. Most information is collected through semi-structured interviewing and observation. Other techniques for obtaining information include reviewing documents and administering questionnaires.

Staff Participation in the Evaluation

A major feature of this evaluation design is that program staff members are extensively involved in the study. They are RBS employees who have helped design the SET and SSDP Programs, who provide training for teachers, and who continue to assist teachers and program implementation. Some have participated actively, helping to conduct

interviews or even becoming full partners and contributing to all aspects of the study. Others have been involved less directly, primarily through informal interaction with evaluators during feedback activities. These program staff became involved more out of economic necessity than design--the evaluator was assigned to the study only part-time (at first, one-quarter time, now one-half time). Study resources were to be increased by enlisting staff assistance. As it turned out, however, their participation enhanced the study and the use of study results (both of which will be discussed in a forthcoming section).

During most of the two and one-half years of the SET/SSDP evaluation, one or two program staff members have been assigned to it as active, direct participants. Initially, two field agents, whose primary program roles were to help develop materials and provide technical assistance to school-level participants, helped with data collection. They did this during the study's first year. They accompanied the evaluator to sites, interviewed teachers, and prepared written field notes. Later, another staff member (one of the co-authors) became a full participant in the study, contributing to design, data collection, and feedback activities.

Beyond this direct participation, other program staff members--including the director--have been involved deliberately and extensively in the evaluation study. Most of this involvement is in activities related to data collection or feedback. These activities involve staff in the evaluation study in the sense that they stimulate and encourage two-way communication between the evaluators and the staff members. The involvement techniques are:

Joint site visits. Program staff and evaluators often attend onsite program development sessions or other project meetings together.

Debriefing sessions. Evaluators ask staff members to describe events the evaluators do not attend as well as other personal or telephone contacts with sites.

Informal interaction. After collecting information about a particular site, evaluators usually give informal feedback to the staff members responsible for program operations in that site.

Feedback meetings. Evaluation findings and their program implications are discussed during formal meetings convened specifically to present recent information. Findings also are discussed during routine staff or other meetings.

Field notes. Field notes, which have been edited to protect informant anonymity (as well as relationships between staff and evaluators), are sometimes shared with individual staff members.

Written statements. Occasionally, after completing a round of interviews or analyzing questionnaire results, evaluators prepare written memos presenting tentative findings.

Formal reports. Formal evaluation reports are written annually and distributed to staff members in draft form.

All of these techniques are interactive. In addition to being read, field notes are usually discussed informally; written statements are used as a basis for feedback meetings; in reacting to drafts of formal reports, program staff typically discuss study findings before they are finalized.

Although a variety of techniques have been used, few are used frequently, minimizing the burdens on both evaluators and program staff. Most feedback is communicated informally through personal interaction. Other techniques have been routinized effectively or are used primarily when staff are making important decisions or when evaluators identify a need to share new data. The evaluators attempt to talk with program

staff frequently and to provide feedback in whatever form seems most effective for communicating information for a particular purpose, but--as they do with all their interactions with program staff--they also try to keep their feedback brief and to the point.

The Benefits of Staff Participation

Participation by program staff in evaluation has had benefits to the evaluation study, the program and its staff, and to program clients. It seems to be a particularly effective strategy for increasing information use. At the same time, it helps keep costs down and produces other benefits such as increasing the evaluation knowledge base, helping staff and evaluators develop shared understandings of the program studied, and facilitating program improvement.

Increased Utilization

The major benefit of program staff participation has been that it accelerates the use of evaluation information. Staff members learn more about assistance needs in program sites as well as about program adjustments that will facilitate its introduction into new schools. Furthermore, this information is acquired sooner than in many evaluation and policy research studies. Program staff have used the data to alter and design new technical assistance activities for single and multiple sites and to make a number of strategic changes in the program. For example:

- developing written materials and holding cross-site seminars to streamline the technical assistance process, especially as it is needed in multiple sites;
- reducing emphasis on specific types of changes in order to enable participants in sites to broaden and increase the flexibility of the issues or problems they address;

- building into the program provisions for technical assistance to principals and for deliberately eliciting explicit district commitment to the program;
- modifying efforts to stimulate high enthusiasm among participants in order to prevent severe declines in motivation and perceptions that expectations were raised falsely;
- revising future technical assistance plans, primarily to increase that assistance;
- ceasing to initiate programs in new sites late in the school year so that activities can be well underway before the year ends and initial momentum is lost;
- advising central councils to adopt short-term as well as long-term projects in an effort to ensure that visible progress occurs without long delay;
- making copies of school improvement plans developed during initial sessions available to schools quickly to enable school staff to use them for development; and
- responding to crises in individual sites.

This increased use of evaluation information can be explained by referring to Leviton and Hughes' clusters of variables which affect utilization, as outlined earlier. Specifically, staff involvement has increased relevance by influencing the types of data sought. Program staff members who participate actively make suggestions about the topics which will be covered during interviews; furthermore, during interviews they sometimes seek answers to questions of their own. Other staff members have increased relevance by informally telling evaluators of their current activities, concerns, and information needs.

Staff participation also has resulted in improved communication, which is perhaps the major reason utilization has increased. Communication is direct, informal, interactive, frequent, and timely. Program staff who interview teachers directly hear their versions of program activities as well as problems they think have hindered progress.

This gives program staff a more vivid understanding of the program's actual use than they could have obtained from reading an evaluation report. Evaluation information is communicated to other program staff members less directly, but it still goes through only the evaluators and typically is communicated to staff directly without being translated into formal written reports. The knowledge is usually communicated informally and interactively, giving program staff an opportunity to ask clarifying questions and discuss findings among themselves and with the evaluators. The involvement of program staff also means that communication occurs more frequently and is more timely; evaluators tell staff members of assistance needs soon after identifying them so that assistance can be provided without the delay that would be likely otherwise.

Leviton and Hughes' cluster of variables labeled "information processing" also helps explain the increased use of evaluation information that comes from the involvement of program staff. Because they help collect findings, users are aware of their relevance. The implications for action are usually obvious, although group feedback sessions help translate findings into policy changes. Most of the information is qualitative, which Leviton and Hughes say users prefer over quantitative data. And differences in the information-processing styles of evaluators and audience members--another important consideration in this cluster--have been minimized as the latter become participants in the evaluation study.

Credibility, another Leviton and Hughes' cluster of variables, is enhanced by program staff members' familiarity with the documentation study and by the frequent interaction among evaluators and program staff.

This interaction reassures program staff that the evaluators are not "out to get" the program, helping staff develop trust in the study. Those staff who are directly involved learn about the evaluation process; they then help convince others of the study's credibility. In particular, the program developer who became an evaluator has helped increase credibility because of his close long-standing relationship with program staff members, who see him more as one of them. His reports and interpretations of interviewees' comments carry a little more weight, and his increased knowledge of program development enables him to suggest strategies for overcoming problems the study identifies.

Another cluster of Leviton and Hughes' variables refers to user commitment and advocacy. This too has been enhanced by involving program staff. Their commitment to the evaluation study has increased as they see that it produces useful information. Staff who participated directly have become advocates of the study. They encourage evaluators to interview school administrators and teachers, go to the evaluators with questions, and request feedback sessions prior to new program initiatives. The program director has been a study advocate from the beginning, helping ensure that findings would be used.

Other Benefits

Another important benefit of staff participation has been that it has increased the study's knowledge base without the expense and effort associated with hiring someone and orienting him or her to the study and program. Furthermore, the backgrounds and perspectives of the three program staff members who participated directly enhance their contributions to the study. Two had been involved in many previous similar efforts to develop and implement new programs in schools. They

understand the process of change and have been quick to identify factors that facilitate or hinder program-related changes in individual sites. The other had helped develop program procedures and materials, was very familiar with the program, and knew what questions to ask about it. The less direct involvement strategies used with other staff have also enlarged the data base, primarily by adding information and alternative viewpoints. A continuing benefit is that program staff provide information voluntarily; having become accustomed to frequent interaction with the evaluators, staff feel comfortable approaching them to discuss new activities and implications for program sites. Program staff treat the evaluators as partners in a collegial relationship, particularly one evaluator who has worked with the staff for several years on a variety of projects and whose office is near theirs.

A further benefit has been that shared understandings of the program have developed as staff members and evaluators have interacted with one another. Thus, many study conclusions have emerged gradually and formal reports are not received with shock or defensive reactions. In fact, the opposite has occurred. Program staff have supported most formally-reported conclusions, which they helped formulate over a period of time and could not very well dispute later. In contrast to other experiences, one evaluator found that the SET/SSDP program director challenged only one conclusion in a recent formal report--a positive one which he said had been over-stated.

For program clients--the funding agent and the staff at the various sites--program staff involvement in evaluation has meant continuous, rapid, focused improvements in the structure and conduct of the programs.

Staff have provided assistance to sites more readily and rapidly than if they were not involved in the evaluation and had less access to information. Staff have also focused more on correcting and modifying weak aspects of the program. The net result is a stronger, more effective program and a more efficient delivery of that program.

Literature on audience involvement and knowledge use suggests that other benefits may be occurring also. Leitko and Peterson (1982), for example, say that validity may be increased when the relationships between researchers and participants (in this case, program developers) improve. This occurs because participants become less threatened by the evaluation study, and thereby more motivated to participate and respond openly and honestly. Another suggested benefit of this kind of participation is that the evaluation information generated may have a lasting effect on program staff because it is more meaningful to them and becomes incorporated into their working knowledge (Kennedy, 1983).

This is definitely true in the case of one of the co-authors who, in the course of carrying out his evaluation responsibilities, came to a greater understanding of the educational change process, what hinders or helps it, and how to capitalize on contextual, political, and other similar variables to introduce changes and make them stick. It seems likely that this happened to other program staff also--either through their direct participation or their vicarious involvement in feedback discussions, for example.

Direct Versus Less Direct Involvement

Direct involvement has tended to be more beneficial than less direct. The field agents who interviewed teachers acquired more information than did staff who were less directly involved, and they

acquired it more directly and immediately. In addition to spending several hours talking to teachers, the field agents read previous evaluation field notes in preparation for interviews and talked with the evaluator enroute to and from a site as well as later in the office, thus quickly learning more about the site's background and the perceptions of teachers the evaluator interviewed. Program staff who are less directly involved, even though their information is filtered through the evaluators and not for several days, still receive more information sooner and more directly than staff do in most evaluation studies.

The Potential Risks of Staff Participation

There are also a number of risks associated with using an evaluation strategy that involves program staff. In contrast to the benefits described above, the risks are relatively hypothetical. They are disadvantages which we think could have occurred but whose negative impacts were so slight that we prefer to label them "risks." One major risk is cooptation of evaluators and developers. Evaluators run the risk of avoiding threatening issues, equivocating negative reports, or generally being less than candid in order to protect their relationships with developer participants. Program staff, on the other hand, run the risk of relying too heavily on information they feel they have helped generate--for example, accepting and acting on evaluators' recommendations at face value without critical analysis. To a minor degree some cooptation probably has occurred in this study, although it is difficult to point to specific instances. It is our impression, however, that there have been no serious consequences.

Another related risk has to do with the integrity of the study. When evaluators emphasize collecting information that is useful to

ongoing program operations, they may neglect background knowledge which could become very important to understanding how a program evolves in a particular school but whose immediate utility is not apparent. That has occurred some in this study, but it results as much from the lack of sufficient resources as from the study's focus. Furthermore, the evaluators are very aware of the importance of background knowledge and attempt to collect it whenever the opportunity arises. So, this is not a serious problem for us yet.

Another more serious problem for a study's integrity may be that program staff who participate actively replace evaluation personnel. Program staff members are usually not trained in evaluation methods, even though they may be very well trained in their own areas of expertise. In addition, their status may be higher--or lower--than that of persons who would have been hired specifically for evaluation tasks. This may tend to influence the nature of evaluation activities. For example, some people are more adept than others at interviewing or at analyzing statistical data. Also, some are more willing to do the tedious tasks associated with compiling questionnaire results or other quantitative data. In this study, depth of staff skills in evaluation as well as their status did influence evaluation activities. Fortunately, the evaluation study was sufficiently flexible to adapt to the type of assistance available, primarily by reducing the emphasis on quantitative information--a direction that was compatible with the staff's information needs. Also helping to minimize this risk was one staff member's training in anthropology and his consequent understanding of the goals and techniques of qualitative methods of inquiry.

Another risk of involving program staff in evaluation activities is the imposition that it makes on their time and priorities. In this instance, staff involvment took time away from developing or assisting in the field in order to learn new skills or conduct evaluation activities. It also meant wearing two hats and, in some cases, reconciling their own value conflicts--whether to approach a situation as an evaluator or a developer or a field assistor. So far no one has complained too loudly about these impositions; continued program staff involvement and the extra responsibilities it brings with it may cause a change, however.

Conclusion

Having weighed the benefits and risks of involving program staff in evaluation studies, we believe that it has been a very worthwhile strategy so far for this study. Increasing the use of evaluation information has been a very important benefit which, in turn, has led to program improvement. Expanding the study's knowledge base at a relatively low cost has been particularly advantageous in this low-budget study. The development of shared understandings of the programs by evaluators and staff members have not only enriched the study, but staff have been more receptive to findings they helped generate and that emerged gradually. The risks that can accompany staff participation have had only slight negative impacts in this instance. Cooptation has been minimal, the study's integrity has not been compromised seriously, and the impositions on evaluators and staff have been far less than the benefits.

We wish to emphasize, however, that a number of situational factors facilitated this involvement and worked to minimize the risks. The fact

that both program and evaluation staff worked for a single unit in RBS and had cordial, positive working relationships helped make frequent interaction and cooperation easier and more convenient. It also helped make task sharing a more legitimate, palatable job activity. Finally, staff and evalutors' acknowledgment of the developmental nature of the programs caused everyone to adopt a "pitch in" frame of mind, making it easier for developers to become involved in evaluation and vice versa.

Although many evaluators are not in situations which will permit as much involvement as easily as was the case in this study, we feel that the benefits noted above will accrue if concerted efforts are made to increase client and staff participation. Depending on the situation, these efforts should focus on audience members who are in a position to use the information: policy makers, developers, administrators, and the like. We found that simply interacting with program staff and administrators to increase their knowledge of the study had a tremendous positive impact on their sense of involvement in and commitment to it.

With the caveats noted earlier, we would recommend that this strategy of involving program staff be considered for other evaluation studies. For us, it has had high pay offs in enlarging the data base, increasing knowledge use, and improving the two programs--all at a relatively low cost.

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